

Hastings Humanists *Newsletter* October 2009

Our blog address is: <http://hastingshumanists.blogspot.com/>

This Month's Meeting: Thursday 8 October, 7pm at The Pig in Paradise.

Discussion of Humanist views on Spiritualism. This subject has been prompted by the Evening of Clairvoyance being promoted by Hastings Observer later in October. If we don't have much to say about this we can move on to the wider subject of Spirituality. As agreed at the AGM we will allow much more time for free discussion and exchange of views rather than a formal presentation. So if you have some experiences to relate, or clear views to express, or points you want answers to, please bring them along.

We are trying out this new venue, and are not sure how suitable it will be. On the two occasions I have been there it has been reasonably quiet. There is a room on the left at the back where we can retreat if necessary.

I've delayed publishing this month's Newsletter so that I can include an account of my visit to the BHA Group Representatives Annual Meeting at Conway Hall on Saturday 3 October. It was well attended, but the Brockway Room in which it was held was rather too small for all the people to move around without much jostling.

The main presentations of interest came from other group representatives about their practical efforts. Ian Abbott of Lancashire Humanists explained how this group grew out of a smaller Blackpool group and how they are taking their message to other towns in the county. Perhaps we need to include East Sussex in our title to get wider coverage in the local press, but on the other hand we would probably have to arrange meetings in Lewes, Eastbourne etc. A meeting they held in Bolton attracted over 50 people, but it seems it was free and the cost of hiring the hall came out of their funds.

Ollie Killingback from Bedfordshire described their experiences in running a stall in the town centre. There was no charge for this from the Council, though getting permission took a while. For the purpose they spent a couple of hundred pounds on a banner and table display and leaflets. They made efforts to stop people to answer a questionnaire on evolution and creationism, with such questions as "Have you ever heard of Charles Darwin". The somewhat alarming results however were on too small a sample to be statistically useful.

Keith Denby of Devon group described his campaign to get local councils to abandon the holding of compulsory prayers before meetings, and trying to change the name of the local Faith Forum to Religious and Belief Forum, as is now apparently required by the Human Rights legislation. Loraine Harding from Keighley, Yorkshire, also described experiences with an Interfaith forum. Several people from the floor spoke of their dislike of the use of the Faith term, e.g. in "faith schools".

The two philosophical presentations I found of less use. Justine Lutterotd on "Ethical Leadership" was rather vague and inconclusive and Richard Norman on "A Humanist Community?" didn't present any thesis but just carried on a discussion of points raised earlier by the chairman Bob Churchill which saw the BHA and its groups as Hubs where the more pro-actively inclined Humanists could get together while in the surrounding community are crowds of non-believers who support what we are doing, sometimes even financially, but don't want to take an active part.

Where the meeting missed an opportunity I think was in failing to take advantage of having all these activists together by allowing them to speak to one another in a round-table discussion where views and experiences could be exchanged rather than all facing the chair.

more overleaf

Our Blog. I forgot to mention above that the Hastings Humanists blog got an "honourable mention" in the Web Awards, at the GRAM but the well-deserved winner was the Suffolk group's website. I've been trying this month to be a little more controversial on the blog, but my efforts have not resulted in any extensive responses, or in fact any comments at all. In one article I criticised Richard Dawkins for using the phrase "Evolution is the creator of life" which seems to redefine "Darwinian evolution" (his term) to include the as yet undetermined processes of "abiogenesis", unless I'm not up to date on the science. I also criticised Caspar Melville of the Rationalist Association for being taken in by AIDs denialists (as extensively described by him on the New Humanist blog).

Local Publicity. A Press Release I sent to the local press resulted in a news item in *Hastings Observer* on Friday 2 October (page 27) with the heading "Exploring the human side". The actual wording of the press release sent was as follows:

Hastings Humanists next meeting (7pm on Thursday 8 October at The Pig in Paradise) is to be a discussion about Humanist views on Spiritualism. This is topical locally since the Observer newspaper series is promoting an event on 22nd October featuring a man who claims to be an "Accurate Clairvoyant Medium". Humanists question whether such superstitious beliefs should be promoted.

The Hastings Humanists blog also has a controversial article which asks if Professor Richard Dawkins is "moving the goalposts" by claiming in a recent article that "Evolution is the creator of life". Usually scientists take evolution to refer to the way species change, and not the actual first origin of life.

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At the first Annual General Meeting held on 10 September Hastings Humanists decided to carry on as an informal grouping rather than adopt a formal constitution, although a Treasurer was appointed to assist the Secretary. There is no membership fee. The meetings are free. Donations are voluntary.

We also had a Letter to the Editor published in the Hastings Observer on Friday 18th September. It was printed in full, but the Editor failed to answer any of the questions. It reads as follows (the heading was added by the editor):

Can you produce evidence?

I notice that the Observer newspaper series is supporting "An Evening of Clairvoyance with Stephen Holbrook" in October. Does this mean you are endorsing the authenticity of this man's claim to be an "Accurate Clairvoyant Medium"? As I understand these terms they mean that he is able to foresee the future and to communicate with spirits of the dead.

Do you have evidence to support these claims? Are the members of your Board of Directors spiritualists, or are you just promoting the show as a form of entertainment? It seems a strange subject for a newspaper to be associated with, since one would expect newspaper reporters to be of a sceptical frame of mind.

I should declare my own interests in this matter. I have helped to set up the Hastings Humanists group, and one of our aims is to provide a counter to all forms of superstition. Our next meeting, on 8th October, will be a discussion on Humanist views of spiritualism and spirituality.

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